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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARTY "PODEMOS" ASKS FOR U.S.
ASSISTANCE TO COUNTER CHAVEZ

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBIN D. MEYER,
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

¶11. (C) Summary: At the Podemos party's request, the Ambassador met September 9 with National Assembly (AN) Deputies Ricardo Gutierrez, Juan Jose Molina, and Ismael Garcia. They argued that the 2010 AN elections were the "last chance for democracy" in Venezuela in light of President Chavez's dismantling of democratic institutions and increasing pressure on independent media outlets. Nevertheless, they were unable to present a platform or strategy to broaden the opposition's appeal among voters, and instead asked that the United States intervene to help Podemos counter Chavez. As the only opposition party with AN representation, Podemos faces an uphill battle to retain its seats under the new electoral rules -- and its unique position as the "voice of the opposition" in the AN. End Summary.

BACKGROUND ON PODEMOS

¶12. (C) Podemos, the "We Can" party, was co-founded in 2002 by Garcia as a break-away from the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) party, when MAS began to oppose Chavez. In 2007, Podemos split with Chavismo over the merging of the parties into the single United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Garcia subsequently announced that Podemos represented a "third way" between the opposition and the PSUV, and the party continues to claim that it adheres to a socialist ideology and that its leaders are longstanding defenders of the 1999 Constitution. Along with Garcia, Molina and Gutierrez (who is considered the party's strategist) are the most high profile of the six Podemos Deputies in the AN. Garcia and Gutierrez frequently point to their leftist "revolutionary" credentials, having served previously as Chavez's campaign manager and as a member of the Venezuelan Communist Party, respectively. Podemos remains a relatively small party, with its geographic electoral base largely concentrated in tiny, densely-populated Aragua State, and to a lesser extent in Bolivar State. Some previously pro-government dissidents may see Podemos as a future home. (Note: Chavista-turned-dissident AN Deputy Wilmer Azuaje told Poloff that he planned to join Podemos. End Note.) Despite its small size, it has enjoyed disproportionate public attention as the "voice of the opposition" within the AN. On behalf of Podemos, Garcia has adopted a prominent role as a spokesman of the opposition and its "unity table" initiative to create a unified electoral and political strategy to counter Chavez in the 2010 legislative elections.

¶3. (C) The Deputies began by detailing what they see as Chavez's systematic destruction of democratic structures in Venezuela and the subjugation of state institutions to the executive. They highlighted the GBRV's closure of radio stations and intimidation of the media, and contended that the 2010 AN elections were the only remaining democratic space available to the opposition and their "last chance for democracy." The Deputies noted their participation in the opposition's "unity table" effort but largely dismissed its effectiveness as a counter to Chavez.

¶4. (C) The Deputies acknowledged the need to offer the public an alternative path to Chavismo in the run-up to AN elections, but were largely at a loss to provide a positive, concrete platform. Garcia suggested that Podemos would support the idea of a "unity ticket" for AN elections, an issue that has bogged down the unity table's efforts to prepare itself for the balloting. (Note: A unity ticket would compel the parties to register and run effectively as a single combined party, akin to the PSUV. Several of the large opposition parties have objected to the idea, arguing it would undermine their individual party structures and confuse voters. End Note.)

¶5. (C) The Podemos Deputies suggested that the political climate in the coming year might be favorable for the opposition. They cited the likelihood that Chavez would push ahead with a controversial new Labor Law ("Ley de Trabajo"), which could produce a significant backlash among already

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mobilized workers. They also noted that a rumored rise in gasoline prices could create significant social unrest. Moreover, the Deputies noted that the creeping failure of the Chavez government to provide public services due to growing budgetary restrictions and corruption could translate into opposition support at the polls. When the Ambassador pointed out that polls indicate Chavez's enduring popularity, the Deputies discounted the polls' accuracy, arguing that poll respondents were too intimidated by a perceived lack of privacy protections to answer negatively to questions about Chavez or his administration.

ASKING FOR U.S. INTERVENTION

¶6. (C) The Deputies highlighted Chavez's increasing ties to Iran and noted the discontent of many Venezuelans with the level of Cuban involvement in Venezuela, including in the ports. They even alleged the involvement of Cuban and left-wing Spanish advisors in drafting the AN legislation being proposed by the Presidency. The Deputies repeatedly pointed out that while Chavez may be personally popular, polls indicated that as many as 80 percent of respondents reject the Cuban model.

¶7. (C) As he has repeatedly done in the past, Garcia pointedly asked what the United States, through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) or other USG channels, could do to help Podemos. Molina and Garcia suggested that U.S. support could be used for Podemos to build an internet- or cable TV-based communications network to counter the closure and intimidation of other media outlets. The Ambassador emphasized that the United States is not intervening in Venezuela, to which Garcia responded, "Yes, but now is the time to begin."

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Although the Podemos Deputies delivered much the same message as they have before, there was an element of panic in their appeal to the Embassy for assistance. This urgency may derive from their sense both that Venezuelan democracy is approaching a particularly vulnerable stage and that their party, notwithstanding its present prominence, faces a significant new challenge to its survival as a result of the new electoral law. Their appeal to the United States was framed in terms of the potential risk to U.S. interests from Cuban and Iranian involvement in Venezuela. End Comment.

DUDDY